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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of empathy in 6- to 9-year-olds. Although empathy is primarily defined as the response of one individual to the emotional state of another, definitions and assessment can be further differentiated depending on the empathizer's response and on the source of the empathizer's knowledge of the other person. Is the observer's response egocentric or does it require perspective-taking skills? Is an emotional response required or can it be a cognitive response? The measure developed for this study assessed four forms of empathy; both affective and cognitive responses were recorded for an empathy measure which required either egocentric or non-egocentric understanding. The empathy measure was administered to 30 six- and 30 nine-year-old boys along with measures of role-taking, altruism, and aggression. Materials included photographs and related stories. Results indicated age differences only for role-taking empathy which, contrary to predictions, decreased with age. Egocentric forms of empathy were positively correlated with each other and negatively correlated with role-taking empathy. They were not significantly correlated with age, role-taking, altruism, or aggression. Role-taking empathy was negatively correlated with age, role-taking, and altruism and unrelated to aggression. Problems of procedure and interpretation are discussed. (BD)

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THE MANY FACES OF EMPATHY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEFINITION AND EVALUATION OF EMPATHY IN CHILDREN

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EMPATHY

Empathy describes the response of one individual to the emotional state of another. However, definitions of empathy and assessment techniques can be differentiated depending on how one defines the source of the empathizer's knowledge of the other person, and the empathizer's response (Iannotti and Meacham, 1974).

The first question asks: Is the observer's response egocentric or does it require perspective-taking skills (see Table 1). Some investigators (Borke, 1971, 1972, 1973) suggest that an empathic response involves identification or projection in which observer egocentrically assumes the other has the same emotional response as he does. As such, empathy is defined as the ability to accurately choose the correct emotional state for a particular situation. This has been labeled social comprehension (see Table 1). Other investigators insist that an empathic response requires that the observer ignore his own perspective and take the point of view of the other individual (Burns and Cavey, 1957; Chandler and Greenspan, 1972). This approach has been labeled emotional role-taking and emphasizes that the accurate empathizer must be able to decenter and take multiple perspectives.

The other issue in defining empathy has been whether an emotional response is required. Feshback (1973) and Iannotti and Meacham (1974) have agreed that an emotional response is necessary to distinguish empathy from a strictly cognitive skill. While Chandler (in press) suggests that the affective and cognitive dimensions are artificially separated by such distinctions and that cognitive role-taking is always accompanied by an emotional response as well. Many theorists have recognized the importance of the affective aspects of empathy and have required that the observer's feelings approximate those of the

Table 1

Definitions of Empathy

Level of Subject's Understanding	Nature of Subject's Response	
	Cognitive	Emotional Matching
Egocentric	(a) Social Comprehension	(c) Egocentric Emotional Matching
Decentered	(b) Emotional Role-taking	(d) Role-taking Empathy

other (Stotland, 1969; Aronfreed, 1969; Krebs, 1970; Mood and Johnson, 1973; Mehrabian and Epstein, 1972; Feshbach and Roe, 1968). Accepting the necessity of matching emotions, the question persists as to the basis for the observer's response. The observer's response may be an egocentric response to the situation as it effects the observer, rather than a response to the other's expressive behavior. This is called egocentric emotional matching. If the observer responds to the other's expressive state and is therefore considering the other's perception of the situation, it requires role-taking or perspective-taking. This has been labeled role-taking empathy. Several theorists have suggested that this form of empathy has the greatest heuristic value and should be positively correlated with pro-social behavior (Iannotti, 1974; Hoffman, 1972). Thus, there are four different definitions of empathy depending on the source of the observer's knowledge, egocentric or decentered, and whether the response is cognitive or emotional.

The measure developed for this study assessed all four forms of empathy. That is, both affective and cognitive responses were recorded for an empathy measure which required either egocentric or non-egocentric understanding. The measure was administered to 30 six- and 30 nin-year-old boys along with measures of role-taking, altruism, and aggression. Some of this data has been reported elsewhere along with descriptions of the measures (Iannotti, 1975a, 1975b).

The measure. Each subject was told a story about a photograph and asked to indicate his own feelings and the feelings of the character in the story. There were 16 test items involving 8 different stories and 16 different photographs. In eight of the photographs the emotional response of the character was congruent with the situation, e.g., a happy child at a birthday party.

In the other eight pictures the character's response was incongruent, e.g., a sad boy at a birthday party. Each test item depicted one of four different emotions, happy, sad, afraid, or angry. Thus there were four presentations of each emotion.

The subjects were asked to indicate how they felt and how the boy in the story felt by pointing to one of eight drawings representing emotional responses (see Table 2). A non-verbal response, pointing to a drawing, was used to assure equivalence of response between six- and nine-year-old subjects. The questions and the order of the congruent and incongruent pictures were counterbalanced and probes were introduced at various points in the testing to assure the genuineness of the child's response. Other devices were included to assure the child's attention to the story and the photograph. Pictorial stimuli were used instead of live models or video tape in order to assure uniformity of presentation and sustained exposure to the emotional response of the character in the story. Social comprehension is demonstrated by the correct selection of the character's emotion when the character's emotion is congruent with the situation or situation-appropriate. This is similar to the Borke measure. Emotional role-taking is demonstrated by correct selection of the character's emotions even though they appear incongruent (inappropriate) to the situation, similar to Chandler's measure. Responding emotional to the situation-appropriate emotional cues of the other is considered to be egocentric emotional matching, similar to Feshbach's measure. If the character's emotion is inappropriate to the situation and the subject responds with a similar affect, it is defined as role-taking empathy.

One should take note, however, that responses to the stimuli with appropriate situational and affective cues may be based on either egocentric or decentered perspectives. That is, the same response may be the product of

Table 2

Empathy Measure:

Which Form of Empathy Is Indicated By A Correct Response

Correspondence of Expressive Cues and Situational Cues in Empathy Stimuli	Question Asked of the Child: How Does the Other Feel?	Question Asked of the Child: How Do You Feel?
Appropriate	(a) Social Comprehension	(c) Egocentric Emotional Matching
Inappropriate	(b) Emotional Role-taking	(d) Role-taking Empathy

different cognitive processes. The responses are ambiguous because the subject may be responding by projecting his own reaction to the situation or by assuming the perspective of the other. One may arrive at the same answer through either process. The stimuli with incongruent situational and emotional cues are also not without problems, since a child who places greater faith in emotional cues will act "non-egocentrically." Facial cues can be faked. The child who is capable of role-taking but has learned to place his faith in situational cues, rather than facial cues, will be labeled egocentric. As the results indicate, this problem deserved further consideration.

Results. The first question which needs to be investigated is: how did the response to these different assessment procedures change with age? Both six- and nine-year-old boys showed a high emotional and cognitive response to the measures of egocentric emotional matching and social comprehension, i.e., measures which permitted an egocentric understanding of the story. The response to these two forms of empathy appears to have developed by age six and does not increase with age after this time. The responses designated as indicating emotional role-taking occurred significantly less than the egocentric forms of empathy and did not change significantly with age. Role-taking empathy also occurred significantly less than the egocentric forms of empathy, as expected, $F = (1,48) = 133,33$, $p < .001$, but contrary to predictions, it decreased with age, $F = (1,48) = 202.09$, $p < .001$, as demonstrated in the negative correlates with age shown in Table 3.

The second question which was investigated is the interrelationship between these four forms of empathy and role-taking, altruism, aggression, and age. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix for these dependent measures. Although the egocentric forms of empathy are correlated with each other and

Table 3

Correlations Between All Dependent Measures and the Four Forms of Empathy

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Social Comprenension				
2. Emotional Role-taking	.01			
3. Egocentric Emotional Matching	.33**	.10		
4. Role-taking Empathy	-.25*	.60***	.00	
5. Altruism	.14	-.14	.14	-.45***
6. Aggression	.10	.01	-.21	.06
7. Role-taking Total	.24	-.13	.03	-.54***
8. Age	.22	-.10	.21	-.46***

Note. n includes 30 kindergarten and 30 third grade subjects.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

were negatively correlated with role-taking empathy, they were not significantly correlated with age, altruism, aggression, or role-taking.

Role-taking empathy was expected to be positively correlated with role-taking and altruism and negatively correlated with aggression. Contrary to these predictions, role-taking empathy was negatively correlated with age, role-taking, and altruism, and unrelated to aggression.

The first conclusion which can be made is that the relationship between empathy and other behaviors is dependent on how empathy is operationalized. Over the age range studied, operations which permit egocentric forms of empathy to be scored as correct do not provide much information about the individual's role-taking skills or his prosocial behaviors.

The form of empathy which involves both role-taking and emotional matching is significantly related to other behaviors, but these relationships are exactly opposite to what would be predicted by several theorists. The results do agree with the prediction of Feshbach (1973) and Iannotti and Meacham (1974) in that cognitive understanding does not necessitate emotional responding. The correlation matrix for emotional role-taking and role-taking empathy are not identical.

The results may be criticized on procedural grounds, such as the use of photographs rather than video tape and the demand characteristics of the measure due to repeated requests for an emotional response from the subject. It may be, however, that the interpretation of the processes necessary for each of the forms of empathy is at fault. As mentioned earlier, an incorrect response to the incongruent stimuli may indicate that the subject has learned to make inferences about the causes of the emotions from the situation, rather than to base his decisions on the physical or perceptual cues (Flapan, 1968). This would be particularly important for any posed stimulus whether

it be drawings, photographs, or video tapes. If the child senses an acting out of emotions he may pay increased attention to the more reliable situational cues rather than the facial cues.

To what extent did the subjects rely on situational cues? An analysis of those responses in which the children's selection matched the situational cues in the incongruent stimuli is presented in Table 4. Situational understanding indicates those responses in which the child identified the situation-appropriate emotional response when in fact the stimuli presented incongruent situational and expressive cues. That is, when the subject saw a sad boy at the birthday party he said that the boy felt happy. This has usually been labeled projection. Situational empathy represents those responses in which the subjects reacted emotionally to situational cues rather than expressive cues when the two cues were incongruent. In the example above the subject would say that he also felt happy. This has traditionally been labeled identification.

These two behaviors suit the original prediction made for emotional role-taking and role-taking empathy. Situational empathy increased with age and was positively correlated with role-taking, altruism, and the forms of empathy which permit both egocentric and non-egocentric responses.

Further research with a wider age range is necessary before all the implications of these findings can be understood. A re-evaluation of both definitions and assessment procedures of empathy is certainly a high priority in future research.

Table 4

Correlations Between All Dependent Measures and the Four Forms of Empathy

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Social Comprehension				
2. Situational Understanding	.10			
3. Egocentric Emotional Matching	.33**	-.04		
4. Situational Empathy	.26*	.58***	.37**	
5. Altruism	.14	.18	.14	.44***
6. Aggression	.10	.00	-.23	-.13
7. Role-taking Total	.24	.18	.03	.44***
8. Age	.22	.19	.21	.44***

Note. n includes 30 kindergarten and 30 third grade subjects.

* p .05

** p .01

*** p .001

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